DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH
Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 60, “Leningrad”
Born: September 25, 1906, in Saint Petersburg
Died: August 9, 1975, in Moscow
Work composed: 1941
First performance: March 5, 1942, in Kuibyshev, USSR; Samuil Samosud conducting the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra

In June of 1941, Adolf Hitler summarily abandoned the non-aggression pact he had signed with the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin two years earlier and ordered two hundred divisions of Nazi soldiers into Russia. The invasion, code named “Plan Barbarossa,” marked the beginning of the most horrendous chapter in the history of human warfare, one that would eventually claim more than twenty million Soviet lives. It quickly became clear that one of the Germans’ first targets was Leningrad. The fall of this city would be a major victory for the Nazis. It was an important port and manufacturing center and, as the former Czarist capital of Saint Petersburg, held special patriotic significance for the Russians. Although it scarcely could have interested Hitler, Leningrad also was the home of the Soviet Union’s most prominent composer, Dmitri Shostakovich.

Shostakovich had attempted to enlist in the Red Army as soon as he heard of the invasion but was rejected because of his extremely poor eyesight and his national reputation as an artist. He did, however, serve as a fire fighter inside Leningrad and helped organize a “Home Guard Theater” to boost morale as the German armies drew around the city and began a terrible siege of bombardment and starvation. Though less famous than the battle for Stalingrad, often cited as the turning point of the war, the Russian stand at Leningrad was hardly less dramatic or heroic. For more than two years the city’s residents endured shelling, air raids and shortages of food, fuel and medical supplies. It is estimated that nearly a million of them perished during the siege. Obstinatey refusing to surrender, Leningrad became a symbol of resistance to Hitler for the rest of Russia, and for the world.

It was only natural that the desperate circumstances inside the city and the courageous response of its populace should have made a profound impression on Shostakovich. What seems extraordinary is that he found the energy and inclination to commemorate these in music written during the early phase of the siege. But then, the creation of his Seventh Symphony, conceived as a tribute to the people of Leningrad, clearly was no ordinary artistic task. Rather, it was a necessity born of the war, a release from the turmoil in which the composer found himself caught up. Shostakovich wrote the music in his free moments, composing, he later reported like a man possessed. “Neither the raids of German planes nor the grim atmosphere within the beleaguered city could interrupt the flow of ideas,” he remembered. “I worked with an inhuman intensity I had never before achieved.”

Shostakovich began work on his symphony in July 1941. At the end of September, having completed three movements, he was ordered to evacuate the city. With his score for the symphony and little else in hand, he flew with his family over enemy lines to Moscow; from there, he retreated another 600 miles south and east to Kuibyshev — a city now known again by its pre-Communist name, Samara — where the Soviet government and much of the nation’s
cultural and intellectual establishment had taken refuge. (Moscow, as well as Leningrad, was in
danger of falling to the Germans during the early phase of the war.) There Shostakovich finished
the symphony late in December. It was performed in Kuibyshev for the first time in March 1942,
before leading Soviet and foreign dignitaries. A month later it was heard in Moscow. This
concert reportedly was interrupted by the announcement of an impending air-raid, but neither
musicians nor audience would take shelter until the symphony had been concluded and
Shostakovich given a long ovation. In the months that followed, the “Leningrad” Symphony was
heard throughout the country and was received as an epic patriotic anthem.

The dramatic story of this symphony still was not finished, however. With the fighting in Russia
dominating the war news, word of the symphony generated tremendous interest in the West. In
the summer of 1942 the score was photographed, like some secret document, onto microfilm,
which then was flown from Moscow to Teheran. From there it was driven to Egypt, flown across
North Africa to Casablanca, crossed the Atlantic by way of Brazil, and arrived at last in the
United States. On July 19, the famed conductor Arturo Toscanini led the first American
performance of the symphony in a radio broadcast that attracted national attention. During the
following year the work was performed more than 60 times by orchestras throughout United
States.

Shostakovich declared that the symphony is not merely battle music but a celebration of
humanity, and his countrymen particularly. “I was guided by a great love for the man in the
street,” he said of his work, “love for the people who have become the bulwark of culture,
civilization and life. I have written my symphony about them ... because I love them from the
bottom of my heart.” The long opening movement begins with an evocation of the heroic
character of Leningrad’s citizenry and of the peaceful life they led before the war. Soon,
however, a distant march tune intrudes upon our attention. It grows louder and more menacing,
leading to a furious climax. When the initial thematic material is recalled, it appears elegiac,
laden with sorrow.

The two middle movements, Shostakovich declared, “express no specific program [or] concrete
facts. They are intended to serve as a lyrical interlude.” First comes a scherzo whose music
suggests nostalgic reverie. The third movement brings a heartfelt Adagio with an energetic
central episode.

Under the circumstances in which the “Leningrad” Symphony was conceived, anything but a
triumphal finale would have been unimaginable. Shostakovich provides this, but the musical
victory is not easily attained. Concise and dramatic, the movement turns from a dark C minor
tonality to bright C major only in its final moments.

What to Listen For

The first movement opens with a sturdy theme suggesting, as the composer put it, “people sure
of themselves and their future.” The tranquil music that follows, he said, indicates “the simple,
peaceful life lived before the war.” But into that serene existence comes a new and entirely
foreign element. Over a snare-drum tattoo, a march-like theme plays in a series of varied
statements. Quiet and seemingly innocuous at first, it grows fierce and menacing, bringing at
least a great sonic cataclysm. The fury at last gives way to a mournful bassoon solo and then more hopeful music scored for strings, though the final moments make clear that martial sounds have not been banished.

Following the light-hearted second movement and lyrical third, the finale brings again a sense of strife. The opening sounds are ominous, and more vigorous warlike rhythms soon overtake the music, which grows shrill and desperate. A poignant slow episode midway through the movement prepares the symphony’s triumphant conclusion.

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